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ABSTRACT

Parent roles and the essential ingredients for successful parent involvement programs are identified in this presentation. Five types of parent roles in education are identified; these are parents as partners, collaborators and problem solvers audience, supporters, and advisors. Elements of successful programs include written policies, administrative support, staff and parent training, use of the partnership approach, two-way communication, networking, and evaluation. A recommendation is made for the election or appointment of a Parent Coordinator. (LMI)

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PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

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It is an honor and a privilege to be speaking with school board directors and school administrators at the 54th Annual Vermont School Board Association Convention. I applaud all those who are here attending this early, rainy, Saturday morning session on Parent-School Partnerships.

The topic this morning is parent-school partnerships. Specifically, I will be talking about what the literature has to say concerning parent involvement and what ingredients are essential for promising parent involvement programs. My hope is that most of you will gain a clear understanding about parent involvement and recognize the various roles parents can play in schools. I also hope that some of the suggestions that you will hear this morning will be considered practical and worthy of discussion with your own school board members and school administration.

Research studies show that parent involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement. During a time when schools are facing increasing budget defeats and less federal and state aid this information would appear to be good news. Parent involvement could be a vital partner in building effective schools. Unfortunately, few school board members or educators are capitalizing on this news. If the research shows that parent involvement works...it certainly seems important enough...and worthy enough...to seriously

consider...doing. I believe that with commitment, careful thought and planning between parents and schools...schools can be more effective...and all children will learn better.

Some of you might be surprised to learn that paretns can have many different roles in schools. Anne Henderson in her book Beyond the Bake Sale. An Educators Guide to Working With Parents defines the five types of parent roles in education. For those who are interested, hand outs will be available on the two chairs in the front row aisle after this session. May I please turn your attention to these roles listed on the first chart.

1) Parents as partners. In this first role parents provide basic obligations to their children. They feed, clothe, and prepare their children for school. Parents foster a supportive home environment for their children. This is the most common type of parent involvement and yet the least often discussed or noted in the literature.

2) Parents as collaborators and problem solvers. This role involves parents who reinforce school efforts. They assist their children with homework, tutoring, and or helping school personnel resolve learning and behavior concerns. The literature shows that this role is most neglected by schools.

3) Parents as audience. In this third role parents attend school sponsored activities such as plays, athletic contests, and other events.

4) Parents as supporters. Parents who volunteer their time in school, chaperone field trips and belong to their school's PTA, PTO, or PTC typically represent this fourth group. Pat Woodward, Vermont State PTA President who is on our panel this morning is a good example of an active parent in her own school. She also represents parents on the state and national level.

5) Parents as advisors and co-decision makers. Most members of this audience could identify with this last role--parents who provide input on important school policy and program decisions. They can also be members of ad hoc committees in their school or school district.

The first three parent roles on this chart benefit children directly. Parents who represent the last two roles--parents as supporters and advisors and co-decision makers benefit the school directly and their own children indirectly.

This second chart shows the percentages of the five different roles of parent involvement in elementary and secondary schools according to Henderson. Note the three highest roles played by parents--parents as partners, collaborators and problem solvers, and audience.

Some other roles of parent involvement include home supporter, co-learner, and advocate. One role that you might find interesting is that of the school ambassador. The school ambassador usually is a well respected member of the community who always has something good to say about your school. The school ambassador spreads the good word both formally and informally. Perhaps this role could be enhanced during school budget time by school boards.

Defining these various roles may seem an easy task, but determining which roles are most important and how to involve parents successfully in these roles may not be so easy. I suggest that school board members and administration identify parent roles in their own school or district and retain and recruit parents accordingly.

For those who are interested in starting or strengthening a parent involvement program, studies have found several elements that are common to successful programs. Recently the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory identified and described seven elements common of promising parent involvement programs in their five-state region which included Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Further information about these efforts are cited in David Williams Jr. and Nancy Chavkin's article Essential Elements of a Strong Parent Involvement Programs. This next chart shows these elements.

1) Written policies. Williams and Chavkin have found that schools that develop written policies serve as the foundation for developing and sustaining parent involvement. This first element legitimizes the importance of parent involvement.

2) Administrative support. Superintendents and principals need support in at least three ways to start and sustain a program. First, funds designated in the budget for implementing programs, second, resources and third, people to carry out the program's efforts.

3) Training: Staff and Parents. This element refers to training for parents and teachers. Training is important and vital to establishing a good program. Parents are not the only group that feels they lack training. Many teachers believe that they also need help in working with parents effectively. Williams and Chavkin believe that one-time, one-shot activities involving training should be avoided.

4) Partnership approach. This forth element refers to working more closely with the home and the school. Joint planning, goal setting, definition of roles, program assessment, development of instructional and school support, and setting school standards are essential in a partnership.

5) Two-way communication. In this element communication between home and school needs to occur frequently and on a regular basis. Parents need to feel comfortable in a non-threatening environment. Teachers need to feel comfortable with parents in their classroom. Parents and

school personnel should be able to share ideas and express concerns.

6) Networking. This element can be described as sharing information, resources, and technical expertise with other school programs. Networking with other programs such as drug and alcohol and AIDS within the school can enhance parent involvement programs.

7) Evaluation. This last element requires regular evaluation activities at key stages in a program. Assessing a parent involvement program at certain times throughout the year will enable time for revision and strengthening of the program.

Williams and Chavkin believe that if these elements are made integral to parent involvement programs, the programs will supply parents and school with new opportunities for supporting student learning at home and at school.

One other idea that I would like to share with you is Henderson's recommendation of electing or appointing a person usually called a Parent Coordinator at the school. The Parent Coordinator can be part time, full time, paid, or voluntary. Many schools prefer to have their local PTA or PTO or an ad hoc committee set up by school administration select a person or persons to fill this position. Studies have shown that without such position parent involvement cannot be successful.

This morning I have outlined the various roles of parent involvement. The seven elements common to successful parent involvement programs have also been presented. It is my hope that each one of you can see that the possibilities seem endless if a group of committed people can join together in partnership on behalf of children.

In conclusion, I would like to offer my winning formula for parent-school partnership. Simply stated, parents and community plus school personnel plus commitment, hard work, and support towards a common goal equals higher student achievement and more effective schools. Let us all recognize the need and work together towards parent-school partnerships.

Thank you very much.

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